Judging for Functional Efficiency

By: Prof. Jan Bonsma, Head Dept. of Animal Products, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

Very straight hocks are undesirable in that this affects the position of the pelvis and results in a smaller pelvic opening, hence, more calving difficulty.

The angle formed by the pin bone, hook bone and trocanter of the femur (hook bone at apex of the angle) should be greater than 20 degrees for easy calving. This angle is an indication of the size of the pelvic opening.

A straight hock tends to raise the level of the trocanter and pin, pushing these bones and the floor of the pelvis up closer to the tail head. The raising of the floor of the pelvis decreases the space between the pelvic bone and the tail head, resulting in less space for the calf to emerge through.

Heritable defects such as weak pasterns and arthritis should be selected against in that they hinder a bull’s ability to service a cow.

Doubled muscled cattle have lower fertility and calves from double muscled bulls cause calving difficulty.

A bull should have dark coarse hair on the crest, neck, upper front leg, lower rib area, and flank. Bulls that are dark in these areas usually have tremendous sex drive. No bull is any good if he won’t service a cow. If a bull’s masculine color fades it is an indication that he is losing his sex drive.

Select cows from on foot or sitting down (down where you can see the udder, etc.) not from horseback or from above in a chute.

By selecting your cattle for functional efficiency either visually as described here or better yet by individual cow records, you can decrease your investment in breeding stock and still sell as many total pounds of calf. By eliminating the freeloaders your net returns will increase.

A cow that doesn’t cycle, breed, conceive, and give you a calf doesn’t make much money.

A dead calf has a very poor growth rate, even if he is the best bred calf that ever was!!

Main Points:

- A well fed cow’s dung is flat like a pancake, with a dip in the center. A not so well fed cow has round fluffy dung. A hungry cow’s dung looks like sliced french loaf.
- Before a cow kicks, her flank will quiver.
- To put a cow up, slap her on the loin in front of the hook bones.
- A glossy teat is desirable and an indication of a good milking cow. When a calf sucks, the last milk the cow lets down is heavy in butter fat, if the calf has gotten enough milk to form a foam in his mouth, this butter fat forms a gloss on the teat, the same as buffing a polished shoe. This gloss won’t form if the calf hasn’t gotten enough milk to form a foam.
- Two folds in the escutcheon (about the level of the stifle joint) on the back of the udder is an indication of a good milking cow.
- Dr. Bonsman said he does not like to see a beef cow produce more than an average of 13 lbs. of milk daily over an 8 month period.
- An aborted heifer that has not suckled a calf will have sharp, pointed teats. A heifer that has suckled a calf will have teats that have a dip in the bottom.
- Dehorned (not polled) cows calve more regular, are more gentle, and are heavier than horned cows, according to Dr. Bonsman.

The North American Simmental
There is no doubt that the cattle business is a life long process of learning. If you aren’t learning you are stuck in your own mind. There is always a new step to take and sometimes you don’t know from what direction.

Growing up in the fifties, and traveling with my dad to look at cattle herds in four states, I developed a thinking about linebred herds that was incorrect. My dad believed in linebreeding so consequently all the herds we visited were linebred. I was always impressed with the uniformity of the cattle we saw. In my mind this was due to linebreeding.

In 1979 I went to Miles City to see the Line one Hereford cow herd. I was shocked. There was no consistency at all. Size and type was all over the place. I did not expect to see this. I wasn’t able to put together the two images I had in my mind of the fifties Herefords and the Line One cattle.

In about 94 or 95, Don Palmer and I were visiting with a seedstock rancher who was a big proponent of linebreeding. I mentioned that Kit was developing a cow herd that was becoming very uniform and at the time was doing no linebreeding. This guy (and I have great respect for what he has accomplished) said that can’t be done without linebreeding.

All the above roamed around unsettled in my brain until a former member of this group explained the difference in what I had experienced (A side note. This gentleman and I had been on opposite sides in almost every discussion, but this showed to me that we need to really listen to everyone in a discussion. I realized his explanation was right and I accepted it. And I thanked him).

Back to the explanation. He said that in the fifties the line bred herds I saw were bred to an ideal. All selecting and culling was due to their minds eye of what they wanted. The line One Herefords were bred only for individual animal performance. I realized this has no definite ideal. Performance can take many shapes. WOW! This blew my linebreeding paradigm to pieces! Now what?

Next is the fact that wild animals (information from Keith) have a low linebreeding or inbreeding coefficient. I had previously thought that the reason wild animals looked alike was because of linebreeding. Well, Keith knocked that one out, so it comes back to, “form follows function.” They look this way because it was dictated by survival and selection.

Now back to cattle. The only way to decide what they should look like in any local environment will be to pull out all or most of their props. This will be the natural animal. It may not look like what you want, but it will be very efficient in your environment and will have a cheap yearly cost and the product will have a low cost to recover when sold. (Refer back to Steve Oswald’s calves).

If hay and supplements are fed and parasite chemicals are used, this is conditioning them to an artificial environment which builds in a higher cost that has to be recovered. I’m not saying we can’t do some things to avert a catastrophe, but we have to be minimalists for the most part.

Once again, you must be relentless in your culling. Save nothing with a problem and cull cow families when a problem is found. I know two ranchers who cull this way and they have virtually trouble free herds. Yes, you will cull many animals at first, but later fewer will be culled when the junk has been replaced by better genetics. Remember, most of your cow problems originated with genetics (keeping heifers from cows that have a problem) and can be eliminated by same! Longevity will go up. Why? Because most defects that could shorten her life have been eliminated.

Older cows are usually sold by people concentrating on performance as the supreme indicator of profit. This is wrong when they are viewed from a logical standpoint. Just because an older cows’ calf is lighter is no reason to cull a cow. If it is a steer and is held over it will catch up. If it is a heifer, ignore the package because the genetics are still there, and genetics are what you are after!

Look back at the way your expenses keep raising. Is your income keeping up? Doubtful. Do you think the inputs will stabilize or keep rising? If you think they will stabilize, good luck. If you think expenses will rise faster than income, then now is the time to change! Become low input before it is too late!

Written by Chip Hines, Colorado
The Nebraska Grazing Lands Coalition invites you to view abundant bird populations and learn how rangeland management plays an important role in the state’s agricultural industry as well as provides an exceptional environment for Nebraska’s bird habitat. All of this and more is part of the Nebraska Sandhills Grazing Systems and Grassland Bird Diversity Tour near Burwell, NE on June 2-3, 2010. This tour is sponsored by Natural Resources Conservation Service, Loup Basin RC&D, Audubon Nebraska, Grassland Foundation, World Wildlife Fund, Nebraska Environmental Trust, Sandhills Task Force, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Nebraska Grazing Lands Coalition, and Nebraska Bird Partnership.

The two-day Nebraska Sandhills Grazing Systems and Grassland Bird Diversity Tour will begin at the Switzer Ranch-Calamus Outfitters where guests will check in and learn about the Switzer Ranch rangeland management view and history. Soon after, they will begin plant identification with Natural Resources Conservation Services and Loup Basin RC&D. Audubon Nebraska will present classroom and field-based bird identification sessions with information regarding habitat needs of various species and how grazing practices influence the quality of grassland bird habitat. That evening, a buffet dinner will be served in the Switzer Ranch barn while Audubon Nebraska officially presents the Morgan, Price Gracie Creek and Switzer Ranch with their Important Bird Area designation, the first private-lands IBA in Nebraska. Following dinner, habitat speaker, Bob Budd, with the State of Wyoming Wildlife and Natural Resource Trust, will speak on the importance of wildlife on the ranch.

The second day will start out early with bird watching and recording species with the Audubon Nebraska. Mid-morning, guests will stop by the Barta Brothers ranch for a break and discussion. The tour will then travel by bus to a research site near Rose, NE where a study is being conducted on habitat use of prairie chicken during nesting and brooding which will be presented by Walt Schacht, Larkin Powell and Lars Anderson with the Department of Agronomy and Horticulture and the School of Natural Resources at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. To finish the tour, guests will travel to the ranch of Bob and Aaron Price for a picnic lunch and presentation on the Price Ranch holistic management and its positive impact on grassland birds.

The cost of the tour is $50, which includes meals. Registration is due May 15, 2010, and participants can register by downloading the registration form at www.nebraskagrazinglands.org or contacting Nebraska Grazing Lands Coalition Coordinator, Marcy Hunter, at 402-465-4304 or marcy@nebraskagrazinglands.org.

Nebraska Range Shortcourse

The Nebraska Range Shortcourse is scheduled for June 21 to 25, 2010, on the campus of Chadron State College. The shortcourse is sponsored by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Chadron State College, and the Nebraska Section Society for Range Management. It is designed to provide individuals who have a background in range management, natural resources, or agriculture an opportunity to increase their knowledge in the field of range management. The week-long course focuses on underlying principles of range management for efficient, sustainable use of rangeland for multiple purposes. The shortcourse can be taken for credit through the University of Nebraska-Lincoln or Chadron State College. Sixteen CEU credits are available for the SRM “Certified Professional in Rangeland Management” program.

Contact Walt Schacht (wschacht@unl.edu; 402-472-0205) if you have questions. The shortcourse
website is at http://agronomy.unl.edu/rangeshortcourse/.

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**Rural Energy For America Program (REAP)**

**What is the purpose of REAP?**
REAP is designed to increase energy efficiencies and stimulate the development of renewable energy systems in rural America.

**Who is eligible?**
- Farmers
- Ranchers
- Rural small business (per Small Business Administration standards)

**How may the funds be used?**
- Installing renewable energy systems.
- Making energy efficiency improvements within the business operation.
- Complete a feasibility study for a renewable energy system.
- Residential uses not eligible.

**What funding is available and what are the terms?**
- Grant and guaranteed loan funds are available.
- Maximum guaranteed loan is $25,000,000 and minimum is $5,000.
- Loan guarantees are up to 85 percent.
- Grants are 25 percent of the eligible costs.
- Renewable energy grants may be for a $2,500 minimum and $500,000 maximum.
- Energy efficiency grants may be for a $1,500 minimum and $250,000 maximum.

Contact Information: Norfolk Area Office -Korey Young (402) 371-5350 Extension 102